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## THE WORK OF NAHUM TEVET. neo-PLASTIC IMAGE deCONSTRUCTED with LIGHTNESS

Nahum Tevet's poetics is based upon the connection between painting, sculpture and architecture. His work relies on a figuration whose form seems to draw on Constructivism and neo-Plasticism, with a geometrical impetus of a centrifugal nature. Sculptured geometry. Sculpture hinged on the fragment. Sculpture that seems to be looked at from the inside, sometimes from above, from a room. One of the standard features of Tevet's work is the view of our cities from above; their tectonic corpus, characterized by the division into fragments – planes, pipes, columns, spaces -, shows high topicality.

The icon – at least in my field which, far from being exclusive and specific, is the borderland between the fields that I like most – is the *analogic city*<sup>1</sup>. In *Giulietta e Romeo* Castellani proposes this icon as the background to his story. The director 'builds' his 'ideal city' – showing it – using whole buildings, or parts of them, taken from different real cities. A composition of figurative fragments, taken from both reality and history, that becomes the background to a story. A technique that brings knowing back to imagining, and experience back to visual impact. The figurative nature 'touches' the entirety of being and demands a high form of understanding. Enriched by an emotional participation that inspires an endless search. Boundless. Enchanting images that make you grasp the meaning of communicating and suggesting. And an eternal wisdom. A discipline based on seeking rather than on a sense of duty. Communicating through images, therefore communicating in riddles that must be solved as time goes by, because they outlast any fleeting fashion. Under no delusion that you could solve it with simple intellectual work. Moving from the ivory tower to the *polis*, from the room to the street.

### Connections among the arts

Tevet's sculptures are made of numerous planes that not only diffract the structure, but also strengthen the archetypal connections – never enough appreciated – between sculpture, painting

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<sup>1</sup> Suggested and theorised by Aldo Rossi

and architecture. «I am not drawing a sharp line between painting, sculpture and architecture»<sup>2</sup>. Placed on the borderlands, his installations fit in a little known figurative and conceptual panorama that offers new perspectives and possibilities in a wider context for you to deal with. With Tevet enriched by science, literature, cinema. The results seem to be reached by combining figuration and experimentalism in order to produce the form. Thus creating new interesting issues - derived from such combinations – that may produce unexplored meaningful forms and even new practices. Bringing them back to fragment.

I will start from architecture, not because of professional bias, but because I found in architecture the first appreciation of the fragment.

Many people quote Mies Van der Rohe's *Less is more*, but just a few remember *God is in the details*. An axiom that teaches the importance of a detail compared to the overall form. A detail which implies essential meanings and makes you focus on what is small, on the relationship between composition and detail, until your eyes zoom in and out like a camera; like in Michelangelo Antonioni's movie *Blow Up*: here, a spot in a bush – an apparent meaningless fragment of a picture - is constantly elaborated by the photographer in a relentless search, thus becoming the ultimate sense of his work (an artist working with images). An endless search. An unexpected surprise.

The very planning relies on the fragment in order to identify a harmony constructed “piece by piece”. This is the logic behind Renzo Piano's work, especially in a figurative way. In fact the details of his architectures are all very clear: his architecture is made up of fragments. Piano's graphics feature an innovation that unfortunately cannot be found in his pupils or in his colleagues yet; and not even in the institutions. I am talking about the so-called abacus of elements: a paper that reports and lists all the elements of the figuration and the construction. We are still obtusely crushed by the plans and rarely we refer to the vertical plane; we have lost the perspective dimension along the way and – swallowed up by easier tasks - we hardly practice the connections between imagination-figuration-realisation.

I would like to mention another episode regarding Piano: at the opening of the Menil Museum in Houston the architect emphasised the fact that he had started his construction from the “concrete leaf”, where the leaf is the element that controls the amount of natural light filtering inside the museum. This fact challenges the functionalist approach which still characterises the logic behind the planning stage. The main purpose of a museum is to light up the exhibited works of art in the best way possible; mounting them represents the problem that gets always solved anyway, a sort of crutch that you may be comfortable to walk with. The light, on the other hand, - how to catch it,

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<sup>2</sup> I quote Frank Gehry's statement in Francesca Garcia-Marquez «Office Building, Venice/California», *Domus*, n. 735, febr., 1992, instead of indicating the essays of mine which develop these connections.

how to control it, how to change it according to the circumstances such as the season and the time of day - is an aspect of perception, therefore a more complex one.

I mention this episode because the fragment becomes the most relevant figurative element in Tevet's work too. The fragment characterizes the final result, reflects the way we are, the way we behave and the configuration of places.

Piano's works incorporate this constructive attitude and include an evocative power. They express future and memory: a trace of rootedness in the cities that they seem to represent.

The nature of Piano's works is a tarsia of fragments.

A balance is reached without aiming at an aesthetically established whole unable to envision any change. A geometry made compact by fragments.

I particularly enjoy this way of doing things. My *man in the room*<sup>3</sup> collects fragments, details, memories. He senses the fact that you can get to a thing through another, sometimes without any story or texture to guide you; you can get to a thing according to the course of time that focuses your attention not only on facts, but also on impressions and feelings.

Like you are watching from a room

The room seems to be the perfect place for you to look at Tevet's works. The room is the place where the perception meets the construction, the hinge between the represented places and the images that they evoke, the admiration that they excite. In the room the world merges with imagination according to one's feelings. In the room there is no gap between thought and life. It is the place where you seek shelter or safety; the place that involves the need to get out, the need to relate to the outside world. Or the need to come back.

The room represents the eye on things, the vehicle to the outside world, the imagination that establishes a communication with the rest. It is no accident that the room features in many movies by Wenders, a director that I deeply admire.

In a room, the girl of *Million Dollar Hotel* watches everything around her; in a room the girl of *Land of Plenty* concentrates; and Howard of *Don't come knocking* gets back to his room before leaving.

The room is also the director's camera, that connects him with the world in a direct way, without intellectual elaborations. The camera captures the flow of images whose textures give space to the vision. If such vision arouses participation then it will make you focus on what is out of frame, on the meanings that go beyond what is visible to the naked eye.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Il treno nella stanza*, Guida, Napoli, 2002.

Cinema relies on the fragment, maybe more than other art forms: made of scenes and frames that sometimes take a metaphorical connotation, resembling a dream-like vision, a peculiar reflection of reality.

The room is also the framework in which Tevet's composition becomes an image. An image which is not shaped by a rhetorical and accomplished balance. Such image, without appearing confused or chaotic, keeps a 'balance', a harmony derived from the depth of the space, from the fragmentation of its elements, from the concurrence of many points of view. It is not just the fourth dimension, but also an inner requisite, a vocation to absorb us and take a particular shape. A shape that pursues an order in which the search for meaning is not prevailing, although existing.

In *Las Meninas* the painter gets out; in Tevet's compositions the observer gets in. Tevet's spaces call for us and absorb us.

The 'anamnesic', evocative power relies on the eyes of the observer, rather than on the historical stratification. Therefore the experience of the world ends in open conceptual dynamics: each fragment carries another fragment and so on, in a constant osmosis. And in this dynamics the readability of the texture is determined by the continuity of the fractures. A poetics that includes the way to contemplate and experience the world. It sculpts the new and this generates it.

#### The deconstructed image

Like Deconstructivism, Tevet's work is realised with fragments that create a figuration, both individually, each fragment on his own, and in connection with the other fragments. The fragment wipes out the unity of the composition and reflects back an order that implies other dimensions and then achieves a complex harmony. Not a classical harmony – definite and absolute – rather a balance based on the uniqueness of each element and on its faculty to be connected to the whole. Each one of his works is a *collage* of dynamically expressive parts. It is the experimentation of a fractal dimension of the image that rejects pre-arranged codes and regular geometry in favour of a creative dimension that tries to extrapolate the meaning of things from their variety. By capturing the geometry of fractals, the figurative imagination is expanded and continuously explored up to its progressive completion. It is a way of doing and representing things that becomes intertwined with other worlds and cannot be traced back to simple rational concepts. The deconstruction of the image realises therefore a disharmonious, asymmetrical figuration that is not influenced by old or previously experienced types of figurations. The language avoids artificiality, refuses any regulating principle and translates itself in «an innovative proposal compared to the classic compositional codes» (Nardi, 1991, p. 43). The deepest purpose of this language is to challenge the planning rules,

therefore harmony, balance, proportion and symmetry, as an alternative to historicism that renovates little-known aspects of modernity, resorting to the changes introduced by history and art. These changes reveal themselves in a spaciality that finally goes beyond the perspective vision, thus coming to an idea of space without perspective that is hinged on movement.

Thanks to these new territories, the architectural imagination is expanded. Because our way of thinking cannot be traced back to rational concepts only, but it also becomes intertwined with other worlds.

The deconstruction of the image results in a figuration without quotations or conditionings due to previously experienced types of figurations. Tevet's language rejects all planning rules and is an innovative proposal compared to the widespread codes. It is not based on easy and reassuring codes such as harmony, equilibrium, proportion, symmetry, or even a safe historicism. Its spaciality finally goes beyond the perspective vision, thus coming to an idea of space hinged on movement. A language inspired by experimentation, a constant search for new figurative results which are not dictated by expressive deliberateness. The installations are often made up of decontextualized objects, in a logic of a 'pop' nature that, as I remember, can be found in Stirling's architecture.

Planes and fragments. Experimental creation along the path to knowledge. A relentless research work.

Art and construction.

Observation and figuration.

Experimentation and vision.

In the realm of mind and eye, by relying on your hands, the aesthetic aspects come to making. Beauty cannot be set apart from the practical skill. So Tevet's poetics seeks representativeness and sensitivity, destabilises the traditional concepts of harmony, breaks the solid form; it shifts the observer's interest from the harmonious whole to the relations among the parts. The fragment realises this gap: a finished order is replaced by the disharmony of elements which keep being linked by a consistency that avoids anything unalterable as regards the figuration. The potential and vital nature of form welcomes the richness of elements in this progressive figuration. Tevet looks like a humanist, more precisely a modernist; his forms hint at advanced technology - the places of our times and the natural behaviour of today's mankind – exploited for the suitability of its images that therefore escape futuristic formalism.

«Order generated from chaos is the best expression to describe (...) modern science; and this expression applies to all disciplines»<sup>4</sup>. It also applies to Tevet's works whose fragments break the solid form in favour of the relationship between the elements, according to a disruptive principle

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<sup>4</sup> Prigogine and Stengers, 1989, pp. 13-28

that clashes with rhetorical harmony. This does not mean that he pursues a chaotic image particularly rich in meanings. The meaning of this new type of order lies in the laws of its own structure. Basically this order lies in a halfway territory between control and shattering, because a perfect order would be cold, it would be too strict; it would be an impoverishment of geometry. The balance is reached through a system of combinations. The resulting harmony arises from a net of relations between the elements; and each element contributes to the final harmony but also expresses its uniqueness. This type of order does not follow a precise and perfect scheme. It is more like a reciprocal agreement that leads the dynamics of the representation. The composition is constantly broken and the readability of the texture depends on the relations between the elements. Space flows through Tevet's work. Space creates new interpretations and teaches us the world and its unique variety. The possibilities of a formal order are virtually innumerable. This is demonstrated by the balance of a bale of straw and by the beauty of chaos<sup>5</sup>. Tevet's figurative research provides for innumerable variations and possibilities.

The anatomy and the mechanics of the city seem to be the origins of his plastic art.

His achievements are based on intuition, on impulse, on appropriate instruments. On training, developing, moulding things by making things. That is the real lesson. The lesson learned from it.

## **Shattered figuration**

The interpenetration of planes, with a neoplastic and centrifugal connotation, is constantly subtracting weight from the figures. The weight of history too. And by doing so it opens a door to the unknown.

It is the same thing that happens to children when they play; and while they play they construct and draw things. It happens to animals too. Spontaneous forms and shapes. When men decided to imitate such forms they brought some degree of innovation. Frei Otto used to look at the spiders while they were spinning the webs. He took pictures of them, blew up the images, made drawings, thus formulating a planning hypothesis – tensile structures – that found the first realisation in the roof covering of Monaco's stadium – realised with Gunter Benish.

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<sup>5</sup>See Günter Benisch's comment during the opening of the exhibition that I organised (Truppi, 1990).

Tevet seems to draw his inspiration from the city, not from any specific city, but from a conceptual and figurative nucleus of modernity, from its constant growth. His places express a reference to the future. He draws the attention on the essence of shapes, trying to obtain indications for an inner relationship that goes beyond what does not work well. He replaces indifference and the sleep of reason and senses with pleasure and contact. The view of his work touches us and show us something that belongs to our deepest selves but that we were not conscious of.

Tevet's lines suggest the image of a place on its way to be shaped and moulded; the lines reveal the essential elements and make you grasp what is invisible to the eye.

His images fuel both the imagination and an immediate, instinctual, emotional participation.

The truth hidden in a shape depends on the reaction it triggers. The artist works on a model which generates connections between reality and sensitivity – the sensitivity of the artist and that of the observer. The configuration of reality incorporates the desire to perceive reality itself and the power to modify it. A painter draws what he sees but also what he feels. He paints reality as it is but he also paints what he perceives, something invisible which can be grasped by a sensitive observer. This connection, this sympathy is the object of the participation and the object of an attempt to recreate, to shape, to mould the territory in order to update it to the present time. This art requires new guide-lines, new criteria of judgement. Today we keep using old criteria that seem to be rational, but they are not rational anymore. We talk about sound pollution, environmental pollution, but nobody talks about figurative pollution. We should introduce new parameters to rule the figurative condition of a place so that we can avoid obscenities that harm children and adults.

For adults it is even more negative, because they proved unable to satisfy the children's assignments regarding environmental issues.

Another connected artist is Boccioni. The dynamic and centrifugal nature belongs to the works of both artists.

A rich plastic invention.

### Figuration and lightness

Fragmentation is a constant search for lightness<sup>6</sup>.

The figurative search involves emancipation from history, styles, abused forms. Sometimes the image of lightness, at least in architecture, goes back to a rootless dwelling in places with no identity. It follows that rootedness and history are not heavy; will is heavy. And yet lightness is important to restore the sense of novelty. Unfortunately today the idea of lightness is constantly

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<sup>6</sup> (R. Piano, *Interview* by Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, p.9)

plundered and subject to a mistake. By exacerbating Fuller's position – who used to ask his colleagues how much their buildings weighed – we tend to associate the idea of lightness to everything light-weight. We tend to identify the idea of lightness with structural interests and fashionable materials. We risk to disappear from history very quickly. The equation lightness = weight is superficial. I think we should consider a more effective equation.

Calvino uses lightness as a criterion to analyze the language and by doing so he restores literature to dignity and value. He quotes Lucrezio – for the “innumerable unexpected potentialities” – Ovidio – for the disintegration of unity – Kundera – to grasp the dubiousness of lightness – Montale – who founds the lightness on persistence. Then Calvino arrives to the conclusion that the value of lightness lies in containing the legacy of literature without manifesting it. No easy escape, then, but a way of changing things. An invitation to “look at the world from a different point of view”, with the eyes of science that “dissolve any heaviness”. And speaking of science he asks a question that I consider essential to tackle the problem from my favourite point of view. “Is it rightful to extrapolate from science an image of the world that fulfils my desires? If I am excited by this operation it is because I feel it could be linked to a very ancient thread” (p. 10). Not only weight reduction, then, but the possibility to embrace the complexity of the modern world. In those terms the word lightness has “three meanings”: - “the lightening of language”, the “weightlessness” of meanings, the imperceptibility of the elements during the process of composition (p. 18). He quotes Paul Valery: “il faut être léger comme l’oiseau e non comme la plume”. We must make a breach in order to grasp what is essential. A game that cannot be accidental or arbitrary, but corresponds to a sensitivity, to an ability.

The thoroughness of the vision and its figurative translation.

Therefore lightness gets rid of arbitrary fantasy games and irrational escapes in order to fuse itself with its own inner value without showing it off. Thus lightness makes its contents enjoyable and persistent.

This happens in biology too: morphogenesis, in fact, is founded on semiconservative replication. This type of replication keeps only one of the original strands and generates two new strands, thus producing ‘change’. A mechanism that produces innovation from a pre-existing matrix. This is the lightness I mean. I like it when ability and fantastic power inspire reflections. I love the lightness referring to thought, time, immanency, heritage – the sense of today's times and the accumulation that generated it – I love when lightness frees itself of the weight of pedantry and historicism and finally pierces the mind, verges on imagination in order to embrace the changes of both life and environment.

Like Tevet's works do.